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Preparedness of America

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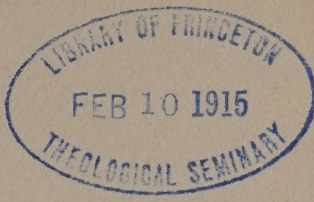

THE PREPAREDNESS OF AMERICA

BY

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER

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I

AN ADDRESS
DELIVERED AT THE MEETING TO ORGANIZE
A LEAGUE FOR THE LIMITATION OF ARMAMENTS
HELD AT THE RAILROAD CLUB, NEW YORK
DECEMBER 18, 1914

II

AN INTERVIEW
REPRINTED FROM THE NEW YORK EVENING POST
DECEMBER 7, 1914

III

A LETTER
REPRINTED FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES
DECEMBER 10, 1914

THE PREPAREDNESS OF AMERICA

BY

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER

I

An address delivered at the meeting
to organize a League for the Limitation of Armaments
Held at the Railroad Club, New York, December 18, 1914

This movement is in the view of all of us an American movement. It is a truly patriotic movement and one wholly devoid of any interest in or relation to partisan politics. The opportunity that to-day confronts the people of the United States and the decisions that are soon to be made by them—indeed the decisions that are now being made in the hearts and minds of the people—are of graver significance and more far-reaching importance than any that have preceded them in a full half century.

We must not permit ourselves to be placed in the position of opposing the fullest possible inquiry by the agents of the people of the United States into their public affairs and into every detail of their public business. For one, I should welcome a properly conducted inquiry into the military and naval expenditures made by the government of the United States in recent years, because I believe that the first result of such inquiry would be to show that under better administrative conditions and under more businesslike management, we should have gotten much more for the money spent—or, to put it in another way, we should have gotten what we need

for less money. Such an inquiry is something quite apart from an agitation for greatly increased military and naval expenditures and from the vigorous exploitation of our nation's so-called lack of preparedness for war.

Moreover, we all recognize that it is the constitutional duty of the government of the United States to be in possession of such force as will enable it to suppress domestic insurrection, to enforce the laws and to protect the states from invasion. That duty is placed upon the government of the United States by the constitution. The experience of one hundred years proves with reasonable completeness that we know how to do all these things and that we have been able to do them without embarking upon a policy of competitive armament building.

The situation that now confronts us is one in which we are invited not to maintain the traditional American policy but to depart from it. And we are asked to depart from it in the face of the most impressive and emphatic lesson that history records that the traditional American policy has been right.

The great war in Europe has produced two kinds of reaction here in the United States. It has produced in one set of minds the reaction of imitation; it has produced in another set of minds the reaction of avoidance. We stand with those who experience the reaction of avoidance.

When we are told in terms of most vivid eloquence that we must be prepared for war, I ask "For what war and for war with whom?" Are we to be prepared for war with the Dominion of Canada, our neighbor to the north? If so, how shall we set about better protecting the long, invisible line that separates the Dominion from the territory of the

United States, extending over more than three thousand five hundred miles, than we have been doing for one hundred years? We have protected it so thoroughly that a century of peace has marked the relations of the two peoples on either side of this undefended line. How better can we protect our valuable commerce on the Great Lakes than by adhering with rigid insistence to the terms of the Rush-Bagot agreement, now nearly one hundred years old, by which we limited ourselves to an armed force on the lakes of two small and long since antiquated gunboats?

But if we are not to be prepared for war with Canada, are we to be prepared for war with Europe? If so, with what nation in Europe, and why are we to prepare just now? There would have been some theoretical force five years ago in the argument that we should be prepared to defend ourselves against invasion from across the sea; but to-day, when our friends in every land are bleeding to death before our eyes, when the nations of Europe are exhausting their manhood, impoverishing their resources, destroying their commerce and their trade, bankrupting their treasuries and using up the raw materials of armaments in the construction of the completed instrumentalities of death—why, when the nations of Europe are about to be reduced to helplessness through exhaustion and starvation should we arm ourselves against any one of them? Who is this invisible, this unknown, this unheralded enemy against whose attack we are to prepare ourselves at such great expense? As practical men and women dealing with facts and facing the realities of politics and of life we ask our militaristic friends for a bill of particulars. Are we to arm to the teeth and draw our resources away from that needed social and

industrial improvement which thrusts problems upon us on every hand in order to expend them upon useless armaments against nobody?

And whose suspicions are we to arouse? When the whole world is looking to us and when the wise men of every nation are saying to America, "You at least are free from the curse of militarism, you at least are in a position to exercise moral suasion and moral leadership," shall we at such a moment climb down from that high position of consequence in order to prepare ourselves to take part in the terrible turmoil of physical conflict and public murder? I say, no.

We are concerned then not merely with a declaration of high principle and of motive and purpose, but we are concerned with the serious business of the education of public opinion. We must direct ourselves to the persuasive, constant and persistent instruction of the public mind, to the end that it may see that the realities of this situation are with the lovers of peace and of international amity and that the imaginary and theoretical aspects of it are with those who desire us to prepare for an unknown war.

In a famous book, Mr. Herbert Spencer traced the history of civilization from a period of militaristic to a later period of industrial organization and life. He indicated just what had happened in the world as mankind made this progress and he pointed out in what ways men had advanced and how they had acquired wealth, intelligence, comfort and manifold privileges by shedding the old clothes of militarism and putting on the garments which belong to a life of free and competitive industry. We do not wish to go backward; we do not wish to turn back the hands on the clock of progress and return this nation

of ours to the earlier and cruder militaristic stage of civilization. We wish rather to pass on into a new and third stage which opens before us as we speak.

As Mr. Spencer traced the progress of civilization from militarism to industry, so to-day we can almost see the progress of civilization from industrialism to the stage of a new and higher morality, to a new and higher conception of international conduct and to an enforcement by reason and morality of those high standards of judgment and action that mark the civilized man in every country in the world.

For a contest to gain the position of leadership in that movement, this nation is prepared. For such a struggle America is armed. By confining our army and navy—sufficient, competent and well furnished—to the proper limits of their activity in a democracy, we shall then keep ourselves free to build that great structure of wisdom, justice, amity and peace on which the continuance and advancement of civilization absolutely depend.

Therefore, I do not conceive of this gathering in terms of protest; I conceive of it rather in terms of an offering of constructive leadership in a great forward movement. We will not permit ourselves to be weighted down with the discarded armor of the Middle Ages, the only proper place for which is in the museums of battered Europe. We wish to be set free. We wish our children to be free. We wish our minds, our labor and our activity to be free. We wish our nation to be free to continue to build a great and beautiful temple of freedom to which the wise and good of every nation will continue to repair, and toward which the nations of stricken Europe will turn for the friendly hand of helpfulness when the sun sets on those Continental fields of carnage yonder.

II

An Interview reprinted from The New York Evening Post
December 7, 1914

Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, is another who shares with the *Evening Post* the opinion that the present agitation about this country's "preparedness" for war is dangerous to a high degree. He so described it in an interview to-day, and asserted that attempts to give publicity to comparisons of our army and navy with those of the warring Powers with the intention of stimulating an increase in our armaments, were not only deplorable, but held out the certainty of national disaster if the agitators' efforts should meet with success.

"The present agitation might have been expected," said President Butler. "There have been in the United States for some time past, with active headquarters at Washington and with a good organization and some resources, organizations made up apparently in part of civilians and in part of men of the services, that have had in view a campaign for increased armaments in the United States, that is, for increasing the standing army and considerably increasing the navy."

A little detective work, Dr. Butler thinks, would reveal a substantial reason back of the presence on the committee of some of those who are endeavoring to force a Congressional inquiry into our preparedness for war. These men in his judgment, even with the addition of others whose coöperation is not so easily explained, do not constitute the making of a very strong movement. That there is, however, reason for anxiety, Dr. Butler strongly believes.

"I have viewed these organizations with some concern," he explained, "because in the first place

they are very persistent and determined. They can offer to the man who does not stop to analyze the situation a great many specific facts and arguments to rouse in him the rather old-fashioned sort of patriotism, and to make him feel in spite of his inclinations toward peace, in spite of peace propaganda, and in spite of disarmament appeals, that no real and lasting result can come except from force, and that whether we like it or not we must prepare ourselves for what is euphemistically called national defence.

INVITING DISASTER

"It is perfectly natural that this movement should have selected this moment for new and vigorous activity on account of the European war. But in my judgment it would be not only deplorable, but disastrous if it should meet with any considerable measure of success. Whatever force might have been attributed five years ago to the argument that armaments were a protection against war and an insurance of peace, to-day that argument is gone forever.

"The European nations that had on so elaborate a scale prepared for war have gotten exactly what they prepared for, with the result that they are impoverishing themselves and wrecking their several civilizations for centuries to come, while no two of them can agree as to what the war is about, or what is at stake, or what caused it.

"The attitude of an American toward the pressure exerted to force us into a militaristic policy—for that is precisely what largely increased armament means—must depend upon whether he is facing forward or facing backward. If he is facing backward, he can't see anything but armed conflict and force and war, and he is a victim of delusions which history is certainly going to report as such. If, on the other hand,

he is facing forward, he recognizes that the entire moral force of the world, including even the very large part that is now submerged in the military conflict brought about by war, has set its face against war, toward a new and truer and more constructive internationalism. He knows that this is also the policy and the hope of the laboring classes throughout the world; of those who manufacture and trade and of those whose business is to build up and husband the financial resources of civilized countries.

"Fortunately, at a time like this, when there is pressure of a powerful and rather specious sort put upon the Government, and when an attempt is made to arouse feeling among influential classes, the people have in the White House a man of President Wilson's firm convictions and determination on this particular subject. I have strong confidence that he will not be stampeded nor cajoled into any militaristic move.

Against whom should the United States defend itself? A few years ago it might have been called upon, it is true, with some superficial show of reason to defend itself against one of the belligerent Powers. But see what this war has done! Not one of the belligerents will be able to attack any other country for a generation, if it wanted to. Even the most military of European States, at the end of this war, will find itself as Servia and Bulgaria found themselves after the long struggle in the Balkans.

"The armies of the world will have been shot to pieces; cannon and ammunition will have been used up and ruined. All the auxiliaries of war will have been absolutely exhausted and wasted. The world is certain to have an era of peace when the war is over, if not from stricken conscience, at least from weariness and physical incapacity.

"For the United States to be swept from her moorings now on the foolish supposition of an attack by Germany, or Japan, or England, or anybody else would be not only an act of folly, but an act of national suicide. We should destroy at once our opportunity for that moral and political leadership which the whole world is looking to us to take and to act upon when the war comes to an end. The one thing the wisest men in Europe most fear is that the United States will throw away the opportunity which fate and history are combining to offer. We should throw that opportunity away in a moment if we were to start a new armament race."

From the point of view of practicability, Dr. Butler finds much to question in the outpourings of the agitators, much of which familiarity with present war operations promptly tags as absurd. Pointing to Congressman Gardner's pamphlet urging "preparedness," on his desk, Dr. Butler laughingly alluded to the fears aroused in some who have read it, that a couple of million troops might be landed in this country by a hostile power. Leaving aside the question of the defence which might be interposed by our navy, the transportation of one-tenth that number of men is in itself, he reminded his interviewer, one of the most perplexing problems facing foreign war offices; if the problem became one of transporting armies across the ocean it assumed the nature of an impossibility.

"Moreover, the lessons of this war are already pretty numerous as to armaments," Dr. Butler continued, "and there may be a good many more to be taught. We have learned, for example, that Sir Percy Scott was a good deal more than half right when he said in May and June last that the day of

dreadnoughts was already over, in view of the possibilities of the submarines. As soon as some ingenious inventor finds a way of disposing of submarines, the same thing may be said of them. We have learned, furthermore, that fortifications built of masonry and cement are of little or no use before modern artillery. The most useful forts are those made of sand and trenches. Therefore we could not fortify our entire coast, our Canadian and Mexican lines, without detailing our entire population for several months, piling up sand and digging trenches. Our type of true defence is the undefended boundary line between the United States and Canada, and not a heavily fortified and blood-stained line like that running from Belfort to Liège."

As to the character and purpose of the inquiry which Congress and the President have been asked to undertake, there can be, Dr. Butler thinks, no doubt. And he believes that attempts to make it appear something more worthy than an effort to start the United States in an armament race are not quite sincere. He recognizes that the agitation is an excuse for getting before a Congressional committee and exploiting before the public the fears of unreasonable persons throughout the country. "Spread heads" in the newspapers and wide publicity on the floor of Congress would be utilized, he is confident, to foster a sentiment in favor of armament increases. If any other purpose was in view, the actual facts could be easily ascertained without such sensational procedure; they could, in his opinion, be found in the reports of the secretaries of the departments and their various bureau chiefs.

According to the diagnosis made by Dr. Butler of America's present relations with the great Powers of the world and the opportunities for world service

which confront her, the time has come for making a momentous decision; he is firm in the conviction that the nation will make the right one, and reject a policy which must lead to war. He thus summed up his own conclusions:

"Our people can have war with somebody or almost anybody in due time and on some excuse if they want to go to the trouble and expense to prepare for it. They can have peace with anybody or everybody by preparing for that.

"The true alternative to a policy of new and greatly enlarged military expenditures under the pretext of national defence is the policy of moral and intellectual leadership in the constructive work of international coöperation. Personally, I have very little doubt as to which alternative the American people will choose to follow when they clearly understand the situation.

"In modern democracies the functions of the army and navy are police, philanthropic, and sanitary functions. Our army and navy have performed these functions admirably and well. Let them continue to do so. Keep them efficient for doing work of this kind, but put behind us forever the notion that we must arm in peace as a preventive of war, and that we must be perpetually defending ourselves or getting ready to defend ourselves against new enemies. No people will be hostile to us unless we, by our conduct, make them so."

III

A Letter reprinted from The New York Times
December 10, 1914

To the Editor of the New York Times:

In your interesting editorial of to-day entitled "This Is Not Militarism," there is a reference to me which once more illustrates a fact that has often struck my attention. Many years ago, in the course of an address at Vassar College on "Public Opinion," I ventured the statement that one of the most usual methods by which public opinion was led to mistaken views of individuals and of movements was through an inaccurate or inadequate report in one newspaper which then became the basis of editorial criticism in numerous other newspapers. On the following morning the *Times* printed in a conspicuous place a report of this address which was in one slight and almost insignificant particular inaccurate. Two days later this inaccuracy was seized upon as the basis for a very vigorous editorial denunciation in the columns of the New York *Sun*, which denunciation rattled round through other newspaper offices for some weeks.

In your editorial of to-day you place in quotation marks certain language which the reporter of the *Evening Post*, who interviewed me on the subject of the present propaganda concerning national preparedness for war, printed without quotation marks and on his own responsibility. Yet he reproduced with such substantial correctness what I did say on this topic that the misinterpretation that your editorial suggests is one to be corrected at once.

The substance of what I said and which is reproduced compactly in the interview in the *Evening Post*, on which your editorial is based, was that a little detective work would probably reveal the fact that despite the appearance of spontaneity, the

various outcroppings of the present agitation for a large military establishment and for increased military expenditures might be traced to a single inspiring source. This may or may not be correct, but it is substantially what I said. I believe it to be true. I added that in some cases at least I believed those who were behind this movement had a business interest in its success. I believe this also.

I added that one of the strange things about a movement of this kind was that it could secure the sincere and enthusiastic support of men of the type of some of those who were announced in the public press as serving on this Committee of Organization. I mentioned by name to the reporter some of the very men whose names are cited in your editorial of today. Their sincerity and high-mindedness are just as great as those of men who hold an opposing view on this subject, but I find that fact makes it more difficult for me to understand their attitude rather than less so. The case against a military agitation in this country at the present time seems to me so conclusive that I find it difficult to comprehend why such agitation should be undertaken and promoted by men of this high type.

It goes without saying that no reasonable person is opposed to an inquiry into any matter of public concern if such inquiry is demanded by a considerable portion of the people, and if it is pressed in good faith. But in the present case what is in mind appears to me to be much less an inquiry than an agitation and an exploitation. Unless I gravely misread the signs, what is intended is to frighten the people of the United States with tales about invasion and attack on the part of somebody or other.

All this seems to me so baseless, both in fact and in theory, as to be wholly unreasonable. Moreover,

were such an agitation to become general throughout the country just now, and especially if it were to be successful in forcing public action in the form of greatly increased military expenditures, accompanied with violent talk in Congress about foreign enemies and the necessity of preparing to defend the nation against them, our position and our influence in the world would be gravely compromised. Such action on our part would take this nation down from the high pedestal on which it stands at present and would put it in the position of imitating the disastrous and forlorn policies which are to-day wrecking Europe. If we are to maintain our moral force, we must refrain from shaking our national fist or even from clenching it.

As I stated to the reporter of the *Evening Post*, the army and navy of the United States have a distinguished record of service in the work of police, in the work of relief and philanthropy, and in the work of public sanitation and engineering. These are the proper fields of work for the army and navy of a democratic people. Surely no one will begrudge whatever may be necessary to make them strong and effective for these ends. When we pass beyond that, however, and begin to measure our strength in terms of military and naval units against the military equipment of the nations of Europe, we have entered upon the fatal path of militarism. We shall have then turned our nation's thoughts away from the rule of law, back to the rule of force.

It must not be forgotten that militarism has its origin in a state of mind and that in reality it is a state of mind. Shall we never learn the full meaning of Lowell's fine line and cease trying to

"Attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-rusted key"

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER.

NEW YORK, Dec. 8, 1914

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